

Abstract of the Contents of one of the Āhōm Puthis, By E. A. GAIT, C. S.

Although, it is well known that the Āhōms, the Shān invaders of Assam, who obtained a foothold in the eastern extremity of the Brāhmaputra valley about the beginning of the 13th century, brought with them from the valley of the Irawadi a written character¹ and a literature of their own, very little has hitherto been done in the direction of examining their records, or of obtaining an insight into their traditions. This is the more to be regretted in that the language, as a spoken one, has practically disappeared, and the knowledge of it is now confined to a few families of Dēōdhāis (priests) and Bāilongs (astrologers), who still retain a lingering belief in the form of worship which was professed by their race before they fell under the influence of Çākta priests, and abandoned their national language and religion for that of the Hindūs whom they had subjugated.² An examination of their historical writings is said to have been made by the late Kāçināth Tāmuli Phukan, in connection with the Assam history, or *Buranji*, which was published in 1844 at the Baptist Mission Press, Sibsāgar, under the auspices of Purandar Singh, the last of the Āhōm Rājas, but none of the purely social or religious writings have, so far as I am aware, ever been noticed.

These writings, or *puthis*, are all inscribed on oblong strips of

¹ The character is derived from the Pālī, and is said by Forbes to resemble the Mōn rather than the Cambodian type.

² For the past twenty years even these sections of the Āhōms have been taking Gōsāins, the alleged reason being that all their countrymen have become orthodox Hindūs, and refuse to associate with them unless they also conform outwardly to the same religion. But they assert that their faith in Indra remains as strong as ever, and that they still make him offerings of ducks, goats, fowls, &c. Any educated person was capable of becoming a *bāilong*, but the office of *Dēōdhāi* was hereditary. In the days of Āhōm rule, the heads of the *dēōdhāis* were sacred, and they were exempted from the liability to pay revenue. Some of them still possess small *niskhirāj* estates. They are still called in to tell omens, but for no other purpose.

Sācī bark,¹ which are written over on both sides, and are protected at the ends by somewhat thicker strips of the same material. They are very carefully preserved, wrapped up in pieces of cloth, and every family of the two sections mentioned above, is in possession of a certain number, which are handed down from father to son. The labour of preparing the bark and of inscribing the writing is considerable, and apart from this, much greater value is attached to an old *puthi* than to a new copy of it. New copies were therefore very seldom made, and in any case, it is very many years since the copies in possession of the modern representatives of the old priests and astrologers were prepared. I saw a number of these *puthis* recently when in Sibsāgar; some of them were black with age, and the characters had in places almost disappeared. The owners set great store by them, and my efforts to become the purchaser of one of them were altogether fruitless. But although they will not sell them, they are quite ready to communicate their contents. My time was limited, and I was only able to make a few rough notes of two. The first described Cukāphā's invasion of Assam, about 1228 A.D., and agreed in the main with the account given in Kāçināth's *buranji*; the second dealt with the creation, and a short notice of the order of events, as there narrated, is reproduced below.

¹ The *Sācī* tree is the same as that known in Bengal as *Agar* (*Aquilaria Agallocha*), the Aloes wood of the Bible, from which are obtained the perfumed chips which are so largely exported from Sylhet for use as incense in temples, &c. Although its bark was widely used as a writing material throughout Assam, prior to the introduction of paper, its employment as such seems to have escaped notice. The following description of the manner of preparing the bark for this purpose, for which I am indebted to Bābū Phani Dhar Chaliha, of Sibsāgar, may therefore be found interesting. A tree is selected of about 15 or 16 years' growth and 30 to 35 inches in girth, measured about 4 feet from the ground. From this the bark is removed in strips, from 6 to 18 feet long, and from 3 to 27 inches in breadth. These strips are rolled up separately with the inner or white part of the bark outwards, and the outer or green part inside, and are dried in the sun for several days. They are then rubbed by hand on a board, or some other hard substance, so as to facilitate the removal of the outer or scaly portion of the bark. After this, they are exposed to the dew for one night, and next morning the outer layer of the bark (নিরুত্তর) is carefully removed, and the bark proper is cut into pieces of a convenient size, 9 to 27 inches long and 3 to 18 inches broad. These are put into cold water for about an hour and the alkali is extracted, after which the surface is scraped smooth with a knife. They are then dried in the sun for half an hour, and when perfectly dry are rubbed with a piece of burnt brick. A paste prepared from *mātīmāh* (*Phaseolus aconitifolius*) is next rubbed in, and the bark is dyed yellow by means of yellow arsenic. This is followed again by sun-drying, after which the strips are rubbed as smooth as marble. The process is now complete, and the strips are ready for use.

I hope in time to be able to give a similar account of some of the folk-lore locked up in other *puthis*. Some educated Assamese gentlemen in Sibsāgar are taking a tardy, but none the less welcome, interest in these relics of a bygone age, and it is to be hoped that their efforts will culminate in some tangible result. As a preparatory step, a register is being prepared, showing the *puthis* in the possession of each family, with a short abstract of the subjects dealt with. When this register has been completed, it will be possible to take steps to procure more detailed information regarding the contents of each *puthi*.

THE ĀHŌM STORY OF THE FLOOD.

Once upon a time, there was intense heat from the sun, which dried up all the water on the face of the earth, so that many people died of thirst. At length the intense heat caused the earth to crack, and an immense volume of boiling water flowed out and killed all remaining living things, except an old man named Thāolīpling, and a cow, who were in a boat made of stone. As the waters rose, this boat was carried by the flood to the summit of a high mountain, the name of which is Ibā, which lies far away to the North-East. The old man and the cow stayed on this mountain, while the water gradually subsided, leaving the bodies of the dead men and animals to decay. From them, such an evil smell arose, that it reached the abode of the Gods, who sent fire down from heaven to burn them. The heat caused by the conflagration was so intense, that the old man, being unable to endure it, killed the cow and took refuge inside its body. There he found the seed of a pumpkin. When the fire had died away, he planted this seed, and a tree grew up which threw out four branches in the direction of the four points of the compass. The northern branch was killed by the cold, the southern branch fell into the fire and died, the western branch was destroyed by the remains of the flood, and only the eastern branch remained. This branch grew and flourished exceedingly, and at last produced a giant gourd, inside of which were men, and every kind of animal, bird and fish, and every kind of plant. The living creatures tried hard to get out, and at length their cries and struggles reached the ears of Indra, who sent a messenger, named Pānthoi, to ascertain what was inside the gourd. Pānthoi went and listened, and heard the cries of men, cattle, elephants, and all sorts of animals. He returned and reported this to Indra, who sent his eldest son Āiphālān to break open the gourd with a flash of lightning. Āiphālān descended to earth to carry out his father's instructions, and at first aimed at the point of the gourd where the men were. The men however implored him to aim elsewhere, and entreated him not to destroy them, saying that if

they were only allowed to live and to escape from the gourd, they would settle down and cultivate. Āiphālān then aimed at the place where the cattle were, but they likewise begged to be spared, saying that they would be required by the men for ploughing. Indra's son again changed the direction of his aim, but was again met by entreaties to discharge his fiery missile at some other part of the gourd. At last, the old man Thāolīpling, who was sitting at the point where the flower had died off from the gourd, offered to sacrifice himself for the men if they agreed first to feed him, and promised to worship him ever afterwards. This they did, and Āiphālān thereupon discharged the lightning towards the part of the gourd on which the old man was sitting. Thāolīpling was killed, but the gourd was split open and everything inside it escaped. Āiphālān then taught the men different occupations. He also taught the birds how to build their nests, and the other animals how to support themselves.

Thāolīpling is still worshipped by the Dēōdhāīs, who make him offerings of sweets, grain, &c. Indra is their main and supreme God, but this does not prevent their also doing homage to the man, but for whose act of self abnegation the gourd might have remained unbroken until the present day.

